BEYOND KINSHIP AND HOUSEHOLDS
Godparents and Orphans: An Introduction

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Households were the focus of many historical studies in the 1970s and 1980s. Most of them were concerned with analyzing the size and structure of residential units and discussing how they fitted with the typologies set forth by the Cambridge Group. The limitations of such an approach, whose major contribution was to facilitate comparisons across societies, spurred a lively discussion, and led to new research aimed at exploring the dynamics of family life through time and across generations. Individuals rather than households became the unit of analysis. Historians endeavored to reconstitute cohort life patterns and analyze the actual contexts in which people lived. In a similar fashion, they paid greater attention to kin relationships and to various social relations resulting from marriages, godparenthood, and the circulation of children. Alliances and networks thus came to the forefront in the study of households.

In response to these changes and trends in studying families of the past, one session of the International Commission on Historical Demography, convened at the Eighteenth International Congress of Historical Sciences in Montreal in late August 1995, was devoted to various forms of extension of the household. Twenty-eight papers were presented, covering a wide spectrum of topics. Most were case studies based on primary sources, and focused on communities in 16 national settings. As the organizer of that session, I spent some time trying to find a common thread among the most innovative papers.

The five papers collected in this issue address, in fact, two related themes, both concerning children. A first set of three papers study alliances that were forged between households in nineteenth-century communities when children were baptized. Baptism was not only a highly valued religious rite; regardless of denomination or creed, it was an important social event, providing an opportunity for adults to build new relationships or strengthen old bonds. In many societies, godparents were chosen among persons whose occupation or status the parents saw as more
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The Icelandic peasants studied by the late Gísli Ágúst Gunnlaugsson and Loftur Guttormsson were mostly tenants with scant means. Extending their social networks could help significantly in bettering their lot or their status. Not surprisingly in view of the prevailing harsh conditions, they chose people of standing as godparents or witnesses, people who could offer them work, flexible prices, or relief. At least one of the usual two godfathers was a notable, especially one in charge of distributing poor relief, or a merchant. The most sought-after godmother was the midwife, a woman known for her skill and good moral standing, for the Lutheran minister appointed her. One of these midwives was godmother to over 250 children. Unfortunately, the ethnographic literature provides no evidence as to whether the godparents or the witnesses lived up to the expected behavior when help was requested from them.

In the small Swedish town of Umeå, in accordance with Lutheran practice, close kin did not appear frequently as witnesses. All social groups chose most of the witnesses—ranging, on average, from three to six males—for the baptismal ceremony among their own group. What set them apart was their relative willingness to mingle with other groups. The bourgeoisie preferred to choose witnesses from other towns. Half of the witnesses at workers’ baptisms came from the same stratum. Master artisans displayed the broadest pattern of social interactions, inviting witnesses from all groups. Shopkeepers showed a clear preference for bourgeois witnesses while appearing frequently at baptisms involving other groups. One variable not provided in Tom Ericsson’s article is the number of males belonging to each occupational group who were eligible to serve as witnesses.

In two slave-holding communities of rural Brazil, godparenthood was perceived by slaves, notwithstanding their poverty and imposed mobility, also as a means to establish useful alliances and develop kinship relations. Although slaves on small coffee plantations tended to choose mainly free godparents, slaves on large plantations preferred other slaves as godparents. Through adopting this form of ritual kinship, according to Ana Maria Lugão Rios, they contributed to the emergence of an “African” identity, and they strengthened the slave community. Both groups, however, considered it advantageous to have within their circle of compadres at least one free person who could serve as an ally. The first child was most likely to get a free godparent. Nowhere did slaves choose (or could claim) masters as godparents. One intriguing feature is the increasing proportion (up to one-quarter of the children) who came to have a saint as godmother at a time when slavery was clearly on the wane.

A second set of two papers deals with the fate of orphans. There have been few studies of orphanhood despite its frequency. Even in nineteenth-century Sweden, after mortality had began to fall, 7.8 percent of children were orphaned before their tenth birthday. That percentage reached 9.6 in southern France in the second half of the century. Of course, the worst off were those who had lost both parents, a situation that affected less than 1 percent of children who reached their tenth
birthday. In that case, they were most likely to join the stream of children bound for service or apprenticeship in houses, shops, or farms. Circulation of children was, after all, a major feature of Western Europe. Auctioning off orphans to the highest bidder in the parish was a common practice in rural Sweden well into the twentieth century.

Many orphans ended up living with a stepparent and other children. Because of high rates of adult mortality and remarriage in ancien régime France, as many as one out of four or five children lived with half-siblings or step-siblings. Laws of inheritance made that coresidence a complex situation and open to scrutiny, because two families could have something at stake wherever the bilinear system of inheritance applied. Accounts of guardianship shed much light, therefore, on the whereabouts of orphans through their early lifetime. Widowed parents, if they remarried, brought along their children into the new couple. Coresidence of half-siblings used to end suddenly with the death of the surviving biological parent. In France as well as in England, orphans did not live with a stepparent alone. Mobility of orphans could reach extremes. Among the numerous lively cases considered by Sylvie Perrier in her article are those two sisters who totaled 13 moves in an 8-year period. Separation of siblings was the general pattern for orphans of both parents.

In a study of five villages of the Valserine Valley in early twentieth-century France, Alain Bideau, Guy Brunet, and Fabrice Foroni used a dual approach: nominative linkage of civil records and census data. They were able to document the life course of orphans together with their family life histories and observe them through two situations: “becoming an orphan” and “being an orphan.” The fate of 256 children who had lost at least one parent was followed. The surviving parent headed 54 of the ensuing 72 sibships, generally without remarrying. Few orphans ended up with their grandparents, uncles/aunts, or other siblings. Domestic service outside of the kin group was also the outcome for just a few.

REFERENCES